At the beginning of my second year as a student in Torrey Academy, I felt quite confident in my ability to meet the challenges of the class. That is, until my tutor evaluated my first term paper of the fall semester. “Mr. Choo …*This paper is unacceptable*…” When I read those words, you can imagine the, almost physical, shock I experienced. I was so surprised, in fact, that I did a quick and wide-eyed check to see if it was indeed my own paper—it was. I had been a good student, I got straight A’s, and I had even won an award in last year’s essay contest! What happened? In answering this question, I found the secret to excellence in every endeavor. The answer has changed my life.

My tutor pointed out two errors which effectively crippled my paper. First, from a technical standpoint, I had failed to be fair in presenting my opponent’s side of the argument. I had given no substantial counter argument to my position. It was as if I had entered a competition in which I was the only participant! Of course, I would win by default, but what an empty victory. I learned that in pursuing the truth, intellectual honesty should always come before the desire to be right. However, this first error was only a symptom of a deeper problem.

My second error was that I had failed to be humble. I am sure we have all met that one person who feels that his opinion is the only one that matters, who feels that he is an exception to the rule. It turned out, that I was that cocky person. I must have made a hilarious caricature, as I arrogantly brushed aside my tutor’s comments when I showed him my first draft. I thought that his advice did not apply to me. How sobering then, when I found that my over-confidence had caused my failure. Before modern medicinal practices, doctors would often have to amputate an appendage in order to save the life of a patient afflicted with gangrene. I, too, had developed a
type of gangrene: pride, and the cure for my sickness was intellectual amputation. It wasn’t easy, and it certainly hurt as I saw my paper being pulverized, but it was what I needed. I needed to see that excellence in thinking and writing does not come about by focusing on style and argumentation but on humility. I needed to learn that in every endeavor, the secret of success is to be humble. T.S. Eliot said it best when he wrote, “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (*Four Quartets* 185). If I could learn to approach everything with an attitude that asked, “how can this make me a better person,” then I would truly be able to grow, thrive and flourish, and be a blessing to myself and others. Conversely, if I continued to approach all things with arrogance and a stubborn refusal to be taught, my career as a student, and ultimately my life, would be filled with frustration and tension.

I will always be awed and grateful that my tutor, Mr. Buhler, cared enough to frankly but compassionately show me where I had gone wrong. When I apologized and vowed not to be prideful again, Mr. Buhler’s answer surprised and humbled me. He again recognized that I was being overly-confident in my promise. He taught me that the answer was not found in promising to never be prideful, but rather, the solution lay in repenting when such a thing did happen again. It has been a year now since that day, and I can honestly say that he was tight. Pride still rears its ugly head frequently. What a joy to know that when I do fall and repent, there is God’s forgiving Grace. Where else can I find a program like Torrey Academy whose carefully selected tutors would invest such care into the development of their students? As a result of this experience in Torrey Academy, I have discovered that humility is indeed the indispensable root of excellence.